

MAW

Pa 1798.34

Youth exhorted to seek God.

A SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE METHODIST CHAPEL,

CANTERBURY,

April the 30th, 1799.

BY JOHN STEPHENS.

Religion! Providence! and After-state!
Here, is firm footing; here, is solid rock!
This can support us; all is sea besides:
Sinks under us; beforms, and then devours.
His hand the good man fastens on the skies,
And bids earth roll, nor feels her idle whirl.

DR. YOUNG.

PRICE THREEPENCE.

φ

To young people in general, and particularly
those who heard it delivered from the pulpit,
this sermon is affectionately inscribed, with
thanks for their candid attention, and prayers
for their salvation and happiness,

By their obliged,

And devoted servant,

J. STEPHENS.

Dover, July 11th, 1799.

2 CHRON. XXXIV, 3.

FOR IN THE EIGHTH YEAR OF HIS REIGN, WHILE HE WAS YET YOUNG, HE BEGAN TO SEEK AFTER THE GOD OF DAVID HIS FATHER.

TWO months have elapsed since our last meeting. *While many have fallen, on our right hand and on our left, the Lord has been long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that we should perish. God grant we may not despise the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering! May the goodness of God lead us to repentance!—I am come to deliver, and you are assembled to hear, a second exhortation to early piety. May the spirit of God fall on us while we hear the word! May he flash conviction on our understandings, and make deep, lasting, saving, impressions on our hearts!*

Knowing the general inefficacy of mere precepts, I have set before you an example of early piety. Not a vulgar example; but that of a king. Not the example of one in circumstances favorable to religion; but of one who, in addition to temptations common to young people, had to struggle with the disadvantages of a bad education—a corrupt court—an idolatrous nation; but who, notwithstanding, *in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, only sixteen*
years

years of age, began to seek after the God of David his father.—Give me leave, my young friends, to shew you what is meant by seeking God—what you should seek to God for, and—the necessity of seeking him in your youth.

I. To seek God implies,

1. *A sense of our wants.* No man will seek what he thinks unnecessary. Look round the world, my friends, and see the general bustle and inquietude of all classes of men, from the king to the peasant. What is it they all so restlessly pursue? What is the great principle which keeps them all in perpetual motion? Put into words, it runs thus; “where shall pleasure be found? and where is the place of true happiness?” Now the man who is disposed to seek God is convinced, that it is not to be found in making great works; building houses; planting vineyards; making gardens and orchards, and planting trees in them of all kinds of fruits; making pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees; getting men-servants and maid-servants, and great possessions of great and small cattle; gathering silver and gold; getting men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, and that of all sorts; therefore the language of his heart is, *Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon me! Lord, thou only canst satisfy my soul’s vast desires—thou only canst fill my large, my immortal capacity! Remember me, O Lord, with the favor that thou bearest unto thy people; O visit me with thy salvation;*

vation; that I may see the good of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that I may glory with thine inheritance!—

To seek God aright implies, also,

2. *Strong desires after him.* Hence we are required to give God our heart; and David gives us to understand, that when he sought God, he was in earnest: *When thou saidst, seek ye my face; my HEART said unto thee, thy face, Lord, will I seek.* And again, in another psalm, he says, *O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee, to see thy power and glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.* He tells us, in the next verse, why his desires after God were so strong: *Because thy loving-kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee.*

To seek God implies,

3. The use of such means as he has appointed for conducting us to himself. When Josiah sought God, he set himself to destroy idolatry—repaired the house of the Lord—caused the law of God to be read before him—united himself to the most virtuous and pious men in the nation, and made a covenant with the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all his heart, and with all his soul. And it is required of all who seek God, to resist and oppose sin, in themselves and others; to forsake
the

the vain amusements of the world, and the company of the ungodly; to read the scriptures, and to call upon God both publicly and in secret. Thus saith the Lord, *Wash you, make you clean: put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do well. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof; neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a father unto you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. Search the scriptures. Thus saith the Lord God; I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel. Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy father who is in secret; and thy father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*

I must not forget to inform you,

4. That, you must seek God through Jesus Christ. No man cometh to the Father, says Christ, but by me; and, I am the way. Paul tells us, there is
one

one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus ; and that he is able to save them to the uttermost, that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say his flesh ; let us come unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need ! This reminds me of my second proposition ; which is,

II. To shew you for what particular blessings you should seek unto God. Much as I love and respect you, my young friends, I must not flatter you.

1. You are guilty, and you must seek God *for pardon.* Have not some of you been lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God, and in this sense idolators ? Have not some of you taken the name of God in vain ? Have not some of you neglected to keep the sabbath day holy ? Have not some of you indulged angry, resentful tempers ? Have not some of you done more than look upon a woman, to desire her in your heart ? Have not some of you been whisperers, back-biters ? Have not some of you coveted, if not made free with, your neighbour's property ? And is it of no importance whether you be forgiven by him who *will bring every work into judgment ?* Who has told you, that the wages of sin is death—that if you turn not he will whet his sword—that he hath bent his bow and made it ready—

ready—that he hath prepared for his enemies the instruments of death? The Lord grant then, that you may know what that meaneth; and the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious; forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin.

2. You are depraved, and therefore you must seek unto God *for the renewing influences of his holy spirit.* To mention regeneration, and the inspiration of God's spirit, is sufficient to raise a cry of Methodism, enthusiasm, fanaticism, in some places. Glorious Methodism! blessed enthusiasm! happy fanaticism! to think and speak like Jesus Christ and his apostles! Jesus Christ tells us, *except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* Which of you, my friends, can free himself from his bondage to corruption, and restore in his soul the holiness, without which no man can see the Lord? *Can the Ethiopian change his skin? or the leopard his spots?* No. Neither can you sanctify your own souls, and make yourselves *meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.* This is the work of the divine spirit. He only can effect it. To him it is easy. Hear the great apostle: *We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures; living in malice and envy; hateful, and hating one another: but after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.* Go then, my young

young friends, and beg of God to “ cleanse the “ thoughts of your hearts by the inspiration of “ his holy spirit.” Go and intreat him to *sprinkle clean water upon you, that you may be clean. Beseech him to cleanse you from all your filthiness, and from all your idols—to take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and to give you an heart of flesh—to put his spirit within you—to cause you to walk in his statutes, to keep his judgments, and to do them.*

3. You must seek unto God for the *witness of his spirit.* Perhaps you have been told, that you can never know your sins are forgiven, and that you are children of God, till you *appear before the judgment seat of Christ.* Then you must never know you are sinners till that period, and consequently can never be saved ; or you will be all your lifetime in bondage to the fear of death ! Miserable doctrine ! Wretched corruption of the word of God ! or rather ignominious opposition to it ! O listen to the plain unsophisticated language of the bible ! *He that keepeth his commandment dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the spirit which he hath given us. The spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.* O seek this invaluable privilege ! Blessed with this, you will be able to “ smile at death’s arrow, and defy its point.” *And in that day thou shalt say, O Lord, I will praise thee : though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortest me. Behold, God is my salvation ; I will trust and not be afraid : for the Lord*
Jeho-

Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.

III. Such are the particular blessings, my friends, for which I would persuade you to seek unto God; and for these I would urge you to seek while you are yet young, for the following reasons.

1. Because there is something in early piety peculiarly lovely, generous, and noble. To give God our hearts, to be humble, devout, and holy, when the evil day seems far from us—when most of our companions are gay and dissipated—when our passions are strong—when sollicitations to sensuality are powerful—when temptations are numerous, and opportunities always at hand—when a thousand lying vanities tell us we can be happy independent of the favor of God—then, I say, to seek all our happiness in God, and devote ourselves to his service, is peculiarly lovely, generous, noble! And, blessed be God, he will remember it for good. He will say to you, when you shall call upon him in the day of trouble, *I remember thee; the kindness of thy youth; the love of thine espousals!* This leads me to observe, that,

2. There are peculiar promises made to encourage such as will remember their Creator in the days of their youth:—*Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: she crieth in the chief place of the concourse, in the openings of the gates:*
in

in the city she uttereth her words, saying, how long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn ye at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. Again, I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me. Riches and honor are with me: yea, durable riches and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver. I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment: that I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures. And when children were brought to Jesus Christ, in the days of his flesh, he manifested a peculiar love for them, and readiness to take them in his arms, put his hands upon them, and bless them.

3. Another reason why you should seek God in your youth is, *that you may have a safe guide through the dangers and difficulties of life.* It is your want of experience, that makes you think this world a paradise. Your grandfather will inform you it is "a dangerous ocean, full of rocks and quicksands; where thousands of once promising young men and women have been destroyed both soul and body." When a foreign ship approaches our coast, the wisely distrusts her own knowledge, and hoists a signal for a pilot. So you, my young friends, should look at the dangers to which you are exposed, and cry out, *save, Lord, or we perish!* If the Almighty pilot do not take the helm, you will

will be driven from the right course, by the impetuous winds of lust—or absorbed in the fascinating whirl-pool of sensuality—or broken on the rocks of temptation—or swallowed up in the quicksands of worldly cares. But if God be with you, you will have no reason to fear, *though the earth should be removed, and the mountains cast into the midst of the sea. When thou passest through the waters, he will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.* Then shall you be able to say, *though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Wherefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.*

4. *The uncertainty of your living to be old, is another reason why you should seek God while you are young. I know the language of youthful vanity is,*

“ Give death his due, the wretched, and the old;

“ Ev’n let him sweep his rubbish to the grave;

“ Let

" Let him not violate kind nature's laws,
 " But own man born to live as well as die.
 " Wretched and old thou giv'st him ; young and gay
 " He takes, and plunder is a tyrant's joy."

Ask that disconsolate matron the cause of those tears you see so copiously flowing down her cheeks ? I will free her from the painful task of informing you. She recollects a daughter, once as lovely, as blooming as you, of whom she is forever deprived ! Ask that venerable man why he bends with grief ? What it is that is *bringing down his grey hairs with sorrow to his grave* ? Alas ! his Joseph, the son of his beloved Rachel, the lad, the comfort of his solitude, the hope of his family, the support of his age, is gone *whence he shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death* ! Go through the church-yards, in this neighbourhood, my friends, read the monumental inscriptions—measure the graves—view the spoils of death ! —Here, lies an infant ; there, a child ; here, a young man ; there, a young woman. This, died slowly ; that, was taken away with a stroke. And how do you know but what has happened to them may befall you ? How do you know but you may be in the number of those myriads whose fun of life goes down at noon ? And oh, how unhappy will you be, if your Lord should come, and find you *living in pleasure, and nourishing your hearts as in a day of slaughter* ! Unholy — unpardoned — unready — unwatchful — *vessels of wrath—fitted for destruction* ! For God's sake, my dear friends, think of this before it be too late.

5. But

5. But admitting it is probable you should live to be old, I would ask whether it is probable you will seek God then, if you neglect to seek him now? I am not afraid to say, *it is not at all likely.* If you will not bend your hearts to God when they are as pliant as a scion of but a year's growth, is it likely you will do it when they become like the unyielding oak, which has stood for two hundred years? No: it is more likely that you will be hewn down by the axe of divine justice, or shivered by the thunderbolts of Almighty wrath; than that you should be moved by the gentle breezes of his grace. If you will not give God your hearts now, while his spirit is striving with you, is it likely you will do it, when, after long resistance and despite, you have forced him to withdraw from you, and you are left to yourselves? Look around you, my friends, and see if you can find one man or woman who was converted after having grown grey in sin. Perhaps you may find one in a town, and two in a city; but is this "fearful odds," sufficient to encourage you to put off religion till you are old? O, rather let this very affecting consideration, prevail upon you to *remember your Creator in the days of your youth!*

6. I shall add but one consideration more. *Early piety will prepare you for a period which MAY come while you are young—which MUST come sometime.* Religion will then appear to be the *one thing needful*, when,

“Leaving

"Leaving the old, both worlds at once you view,
 "Standing upon the threshold of the new."

How painful then to recollect, that you have consumed your life in vain amusements, or worldly cares, or sinful pleasures!—That you have wasted your precious time, every moment of which now appears to be worth a kingdom!—That you have neglected your immortal soul, which is of more value than ten thousand worlds!—That you have slighted Jesus Christ, without whom, you must be forever miserable!—That you have sold heaven for the momentary pleasures of sin, which you would now purchase by a thousand years suffering in hell, if it could be procured at that immense price! Affecting scene! Your physician has given you over. Your relatives can do no more for you, than wipe the cold sweat from your face. Adieu! you are going; but WHERE? Not to angels; they have abandoned you in despair. Not to heaven; you were invited, but you *begged to be excused*. Not to God; he *called, but you refused*; and now he will justly *laugh at your calamity*.—Shall I disclose the awful secret? Shall I show you the fiends! the darkness! the fire! the chains! the worm! the groans! the tears! the desperation!—Good God! help us to *remember thee in the days of our youth*; before this *evil day* come, and those everlasting ages, when we shall have reason to say, *we have no pleasure in them!* O that we were wise! that we understood this, that we would consider our latter end! O teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts
 unto

unto wisdom! Lord, spare us a little, that we may recover our strength, before we go hence, to be no more!

Come, my young friends, let us seek the Lord, while he may be found; let us call upon him, while he is near. NOW there is a fountain open for sin and uncleanness. Behold, NOW is the accepted time; behold, NOW is the day of salvation. NOW the spirit and the bride say, come. And let him that heareth say, come. And let him that is athirst, come: and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

To God, the Father—God, the Son—and God, the Holy Ghost—be equal and endless praises! Amen!

